

Q and A

on Abhidhamma Made Easy Class

Dear Students,

Below is Q and A on *Abhidhamma* posed by Dr. Jeffrey Po from 'For You' Buddhist magazine for your pleasure reading.

1. Can you briefly describe the *Abhidhamma* course that is presently being conducted in your temple?

The volume and system of the *Abhidhamma* is very large and complex, making short term study and comprehension impractical. However initially studying a concise text for an introduction to the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* is valuable. For that reason, we teach students using as a textbook the “A Comprehensive Manual of *Abhidhamma*” (Bodhi and Nārada, 1999). This book is a translation with notes and explanatory guide of the “*Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha*” by Ācariya Anuruddha which has been the hand-book for *Theravāda abhidhamma* students from generation to generation.

Abhidhammattha Saṅgaha is the most famous *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* commentary, regarded as a key to opening the door of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. Because it is extremely concise, teachers still must refer to the very extensive sub commentaries. In this way, students get the best results of their study.

In my course there is no time limit in which to finish the book nor do I ask my students to sit for any examinations. In this way, I hope students can study the subject in a most relaxed manner which, I believe, is the best method to appreciate the profound *Abhidhamma*. Significantly, studying in a relaxed manner seems to be most appropriate for Singaporeans who are busy and living in a stressful country.

Once they finish their study, students can expect to have a better and more complete understanding of Buddha's teaching. In addition, they should be able to self-study Buddha's teaching resulting in their becoming a better and happier person; they will have an understanding of all important *Dhamma* points which can be applied into their daily lives.

For example:

- What are emotions and how they work; how emotions affect matter (= body) and vice versa;
- How the thought process occurs and how to relate it to *kamma* and its results;
- What is the universe and how our action corresponds to and determine the world we live in;
- Dependent origination and conditional relations that are important to understanding the cause and effect of phenomena, etc.

2. Do you think *Abhidhamma* topics should be more popularized as part of *Dhamma* propagation?

Definitely yes! The study of *Abhidhamma* enhances the understanding of the *Suttas*. Without understanding *Abhidhamma*, how deep can one understand the *Suttas*? Of course one can understand the *Suttas* without understanding *Abhidhamma*, but, once again, how deeply? I think that history has shown the value of understanding the *Abhidhamma*. With *Abhidhamma* knowledge at hand, studying *Suttas* will become more enjoyable since they are able to gain a deeper insight results.

When *Suttas* are studied, due to their succinctness, quite often reference to commentaries is very useful. And we find that quite often commentaries are based on the *Abhidhamma*. Just to mention one, look at the *Sutta* titled '*Oghatarana Sutta*' or the "Discourse on Crossing the Flood" of *Sagāthāvagga*, (SN). In this *Sutta*, a *deva* asks Buddha how he crossed the flood? That is it. Now, how is one to understand this question? The *Sutta* is silent about the meaning of "flood". One might wrongly think that the *deva* came all the way down only to ask Buddha how to swim to cross a flooded stream! In this situation, a knowledge of *Abhidhamma* rescues us because it

teaches the meaning of "flood". Interestingly, when we open the *Sutta's* commentary we find that the elaboration is in an *Abhidhammic* fashion!

The *Abhidhamma* was a meditative experience of Buddha. Therefore, it can be regarded as a map for those who desire to seriously walk the Path. A most famous hand-book for meditators is the "*Visuddhimagga*" or "The Path of Purification". For over a thousand years this book has been used as guidance for those who practice meditation. In the book there is a chapter on "*Paññābhūminiddeso*" or "The Soil of Understanding" that describes the theories to be mastered prior to developing insight and is based on the *Abhidhamma*. So, if you want to go to *Nibbāna*, it is most valuable to have the *Abhidhamma* map with you. Otherwise, you can easily get lost.

Lastly, there is an interesting statement found in the *Atthasālinī*, a commentary to the first book of *Abhidhamma* — *Dhammasaṅgaṇī*. It is stated that it is compulsory for a *dhamma* preacher to understand the *Abhidhamma*. If a *dhamma* preacher does not understand the *Abhidhamma*, he may be unclear when explaining the different kinds of *Kamma* and their results; the distinction between mind and matter; and the different kinds of states. Such confusion will never arise in those with an understanding of the *Abhidhamma*. That is what *Atthasālinī* says. Now, it remains for us to contemplate upon it whether or not the statement is true.

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Yours in the Dhamma,

Bhikkhu Kheminda